

## In brief

**Doctors arrested on suspicion of manslaughter:** Two doctors who mistakenly injected the cytotoxic drug vincristine into the spine instead of a vein of Wayne Jowett, at Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham, have been arrested on suspicion of manslaughter. The coroner, who recorded a verdict of accidental death on Mr Jowett, aged 18, was told that 14 patients had died or been left paralysed as a result of similar errors in the past 15 years (*BMJ* 2001;322:1013).

**UK medical school to cut 50 posts:** One of the United Kingdom's largest groups of teaching hospitals, comprising the recently merged Guy's, King's, and St Thomas's School of Medicine, is planning to shed about 50 clinical academic posts at King's College London. The aim is to save about £3.5m (\$5.1m; €5.6m) a year.

**Germany bans import of human stem cells:** The German parliament has passed a law forbidding the import of human embryonic stem cells. Exceptions are possible if the cells are used for high standard research purposes that cannot be achieved by other means and if consent has been given by a state control agency. Only stem cell lines produced before January 2002 can be used because this ensures that they have not been ordered especially for German research. Human embryo research is forbidden in Germany.

**Funding announced for UK genetic database:** The Wellcome Trust, the Medical Research Council, and the Department of Health announced this week that they are to provide an initial £45m (\$66m; €73m) for the UK "biobank" project, in which DNA samples and medical records will be collected from 500 000 volunteers, aged 45-69 (*BMJ* 2001;322:755).

**Dame Deirdre Hine to retire as CHI's chairwoman:** Dame Deirdre Hine has decided not to seek reappointment as the chairwoman of the Commission for Health Improvement (CHI) and will retire from the post when her current term of office finishes in October.

## Australia acts to restrict IVF treatment to heterosexual couples

Christopher Zinn *Sydney*

The Australian federal government has taken action to prevent single and lesbian women from accessing in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment in the latest step of an ongoing legal battle. Prime Minister John Howard has denied MPs a conscience vote on the controversial measure—a measure that the Australian Medical Association denounced as discriminatory. The cabinet is also planning to change the Sex Discrimination Act so that states could limit IVF treatment to heterosexual couples.

The government has been waiting for a High Court decision in the case of a single Melbourne woman, Ms Leesa Meldrum, who has been campaigning for 10 years to have access to IVF.

Her home state of Victoria's Infertility Treatment Act banned single and lesbian women from IVF treatment, but a federal court found that the ban was in violation of the federal Sex Discrimination Act. Australia's Catholic bishops sought, and

have just failed, to overturn this ruling in the High Court.

Mr Howard first intervened in the debate two years ago, arguing that it was the right of every child to have both a father and mother as "role models." "We do take the view that, all things being equal, children are entitled to the opportunity of both a mother and a father," he said.



Leesa Meldrum: "Why are these people so against single women?"

## Drug companies maintain "astounding" profits

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

Pharmaceuticals again ranked as the most profitable sector in the United States, topping the annual Fortune 500 ranking of America's top industries, released this month.

The pharmaceutical industry topped all three of *Fortune* magazine's measures of profitability for 2001, making this decade the third in which the industry has been at or near the top in all the magazine's measures of profitability.

The occasion was seized by critics of the industry as reflecting corporate greed. Frank Clemente, director of Public Citizen's Congress Watch, said: "During a year in which there was much talk of sacrifice in the

national interest, drug companies increased their astounding profits by hiking prescription prices, advertising some medicines more than Nike shoes, and successfully lobbying for lucrative monopoly patent extensions. Sometimes what's best for shareholders and chief executive officers isn't what's best for all Americans, particularly senior citizens who lack insurance cover for prescription drugs."

Overall profits of Fortune 500 companies declined by 53% in 2001, while the top 10 US drug makers increased profits by 32%, from \$28bn (£20bn; €31bn) to \$37bn, according to Public Citizen's analysis of the Fortune 500 data. Together the 10 drug companies in the list had the greatest return on revenues, reporting a profit of 18.5 cents for every dollar of sales, eight times higher than the median for all Fortune 500 industries, which was 2.2 cents.

The drugs industry says it needs extraordinary profits to fund risky research and development of new drugs and to absorb the high cost of drug failures in

The president of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Kerry Phelps, said that the government's attempted ban was a "false and misleading excuse" to support what she considered were discriminatory laws. "It's disgraceful that the government is proposing discriminatory legislation against single women and lesbians," she said.

She also attacked Mr Howard's stand that children of same sex parents were somehow disadvantaged, claiming that international research had found no difference in the children's outcomes. □

clinical trials. The industry's output of new drugs has risen only modestly in the past two decades, despite a more than sixfold increase, after adjustment for inflation, in spending on research and development—to more than \$30bn a year. In the past few years output has actually declined. Many industry supporters blame tougher scrutiny by the Food and Drug Administration.

The time spent to develop a drug, not counting the months consumed by government review, has lengthened from about nine years in the 1980s to more than 11 years, according to the Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development, and the cost has more than doubled, after adjustment for inflation, to \$800m. Public Citizen notes that the Tufts Center gets money from drug companies and maintains that the centre's figures are inflated to justify high drug costs. □

A copy of Public Citizen's report is available at its website ([www.citizen.org](http://www.citizen.org)).